Monotheism and Polytheism in the Ancient Near East

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Subject Area: World History

Time Required: 1-2 class sessions

General Topics: Religious practices and beliefs in the Ancient Near East among Hebrew, Egyptian and Mesopotamian societies; monotheism, polytheism and henotheism

Average Grade Level from Readable.io: 11.0

SUMMARY

This lesson asks students to think about the roles of religion in modern American society, and to consider how religion and gods were perceived differently in the ancient societies of the Fertile Crescent. Additionally, students will explore how and why the religious beliefs of the Israelites began to change around 500 B.C.E. To do this, students will study images of ancient gods and goddesses to look for clues about religion in ancient societies and to develop deep understandings of the terms monotheism, polytheism and henotheism. Monotheism is the belief in only one god, polytheism is the worship of multiple gods, and henotheism is belief in multiple gods but worship of only one of them. By investigating specific biblical passages as ancient texts, students will hone their critical reading and historical reasoning skills. They will also begin to understand why many modern scholars see some of these passages as evidence that ancient Israelites were once henotheistic — that is, they acknowledged the existence of multiple gods while worshipping only one. Some of what the students find in these passages may surprise them. Certainly, we hope it will encourage them to think about how and why beliefs like polytheism, monotheism and henotheism evolve differently in different societies.

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ALIGNMENT WITH GEORGIA STANDARDS OF EXCELLENCE

World History:

SSWH1: Analyze the origins, structures and interactions of societies in the ancient world from 3500 B.C.E./B.C. to 500 B.C.E./B.C.

SSWH1c: Explain the development of monotheism, include: the concepts developed by the ancient Hebrews.

Social Studies Information Processing Skills:

1. Compare similarities and differences
5. Identify main idea, detail, sequence of events, and cause and effect in a social studies context
6. Identify and use primary and secondary sources
10. Analyze artifacts
11. Draw conclusions and make generalizations

Reading Standards for Literacy in History/Social Studies:

L11-12RHSS2: Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.

L11-12RHSS6: Evaluate authors' differing points of view on the same historical event or issue by assessing the authors' claims, reasoning and evidence.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students will be able to:

- give clear working definitions of the terms *monotheism* (belief in one deity), *polytheism* (belief in multiple deities, and *henotheism* (exclusive devotion to one deity while believing in the existence of others);
- provide examples from primary sources to illustrate the difference between monotheism, polytheism and henotheism;
- compare modern American understandings of the concepts of worship, religion and gods, to Ancient Near Eastern practices and beliefs; and
- describe how ancient iconography and texts illustrate diverse ancient beliefs about the nature and number of gods.

PRIMARY SOURCES QUOTES

As for the terms of this treaty between the Hittites and the Egyptians: for him who violates this treaty, a thousand gods of the Hittites together with a thousand gods of the Egyptians will destroy his palace, his land, and his servants.

Treaty between the Hittites and the Egyptians (1258 B.C.E.)

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.
Exodus 20:2-6, New Revised Standard Version

Assyrian soldiers of Ashurbanipal carrying a statue of Hadad (also known as Ramman), the god of tempest and thunder. A drawing based on a stone engraving.

Source:
Faucher-Gudin. Hadad. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17955031. After Austen Henry Layard, History of Egypt, Chaldea, Syria, Babylonia and Assyria, Vol. III.

INTRODUCTION

Focusing on societies of the Ancient Near East from 3500-500 B.C.E, this lesson is intended to help students explore the concepts of polytheism, monotheism, henotheism and pantheon and to help them appreciate the role that religion played in the various cultures of the Fertile Crescent. After completing the lesson, students will understand that polytheism reflects the cultural diversity and pluralism of the Ancient Near East (i.e., different groups will naturally worship many different "gods" because they hold many different values and interests, not all of equal importance) and that there was a perceived close relationship between the gods and state leaders. In the eyes of many scholars, sometime around 1200 B.C.E. the Israelites seem to have adopted a henotheistic belief system that required devotion to one powerful god (Yahweh), while acknowledging the existence of others. Around 500 B.C.E. some of their descendants seemed to have been exploring the notion that there was, in fact, only one god (monotheism). These monotheistic tendencies proved to be foundational for the classical Jewish belief in a single god.

As a warm-up activity designed to help bridge the gulf separating modern western assumptions about "gods" and religion from the actual nature of gods and religion in the Ancient Near East, students will be asked to consider the various things that people "worship" here in America today. Students will then examine iconography depicting various gods (Baal, Marduk, Hadad, et al.) specifically to gain a clearer understanding of the ways major gods are associated with the state or empire while other gods and goddesses are associated with different aspects of Ancient Near Eastern life. Students will use these images to develop a deeper conceptual understanding of polytheism (including the intrinsic connection with cultural pluralism) in this time and place and the relationship of religion to political authority. Finally, students will be asked to examine biblical passages that are often presumed to reflect monotheistic beliefs. They will also read a brief attached essay (Gary Herion, "How can political treaties in the Ancient Near East help us understand the Israelite idea of covenant and their beliefs about god?") to compare ancient Israelite notions of covenant with Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties. As an assessment, they will be encouraged to develop working definitions of three key terms: polytheism, monotheism and henotheism, using media of their choosing.

While this lesson suggests that monotheism among ancient Israelites developed over time, some Jews and Christians may hold traditional beliefs that state Judaism was monotheistic from the beginning. Teachers should explain to students that Jewish, Christian and other scholars hold a range of positions on such issues. This lesson is not intended to promote a particular religious viewpoint but rather to study Ancient Near Eastern images and passages from a scholarly perspective to understand better the development of religious and cultural ideas over time. For students who are reluctant to consider the possibility that ancient Israelites were henotheistic, teachers might instead focus on the ways specific passages lend themselves to multiple interpretations. For example, when discussing Exodus 20:2-6, teachers might ask, "Why might some scholars suggest this passage reflects henotheism and others monotheism?" Teachers could also remind students that historians look at the evidence available in primary sources and develop varying interpretations, which they must defend. This is a skill practiced in many history classrooms and within this lesson. Different interpretations of

texts and historical events are common and useful for moving dialogue about religious and historical topics forward.

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What was the role of religion and of the gods in the polytheistic societies of the Ancient Near East?
- How and why did the religious beliefs of the Israelites begin to change around 500 B.C.E., despite the prevalence of polytheism in the Ancient Near East?

BACKGROUND

The religious world of the Ancient Near East was largely polytheistic, with a range of gods and goddesses reflecting not only the minor concerns of this or that social group (like the god of the Sumerian tavern owners, or the gods of specific guilds, or even the god of a specific apartment building), but also the major concerns of the ruling elite (the chief gods that reflected the power of the state). Many of these gods are replicated across cultures, as noted by gods with similar powers and associations and only slight name changes (e.g., Inanna is a Sumerian goddess of love and war; Ishtar is her Akkadian counterpart). (The ancients themselves apparently recognized that the values, concerns and associations for such goddesses were the same, and they knew that the names were essentially interchangeable.) Because our source material almost exclusively reflects an elite perspective, it is difficult to fully understand how polytheism might have functioned across all levels of society or to determine whether there was one coherent and overarching belief system in ancient civilizations; this is especially true of ancient Egypt. However, the sources point to what was important to the class of people ruling over these complex, diverse and pluralistic societies: maintaining social order through the power of government. This is reflected in the way that major gods were associated with kings and states, not only in mythological texts but also in artistic imagery. Unlike the modern separation of church and state, the religious sphere and political sphere were closely tied together. All the other gods could be listed in the "pantheon," which would rank them (and the groups devoted to them) according to the order of importance to the chief gods of the state (and to the elite who administered the affairs of state.

Another key point that is especially pertinent to the case of ancient Israel: Some people in the Ancient Near East were far more concerned with practical and immediate concerns, such as whether they were faithful to the specific god they had pledged to serve, than they were with theoretical and speculative concerns about how many gods actually existed. This is the phenomenon of **henotheism**, which acknowledges the existence of many gods while specifying a devotion to one god in particular. Many scholars think that there is good evidence that some ancient Hebrews were henotheistic, privileging a god named Yahweh before all other gods. This insight may surprise (or even shock) some modern

Jews and Christians, but it also may help students today to appreciate the extent to which divine beings were perceived differently in ancient times than they are today.

PREPARATION INSTRUCTIONS

This lesson will be divided into three segments. Teachers may choose to use all three or only those that suit their classroom needs.

1. **Warm up and image study.** In this segment, students will use iconography and the concept of "worship" as used loosely in American society as an access point to appreciate how Ancient Near Eastern people thought about their "gods" and how religion functioned in those polytheistic societies.
    a. Teacher materials: Teshub and Hepat PowerPoint (talking points included in Notes section), background reading on pages 39-40 in Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators
    b. Student materials: One of three image sets as assigned by teacher
    c. If students are having difficulty "reading" the images, you might choose to share the chart on page 40 of Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators as a key to some of the symbols

2. **Primary source examination**. In this segment, students will examine biblical passages to explore the subtle difference between monotheism and henotheism.
    a. Teacher materials: "Monotheism, Henotheism, or Polytheism?" answer key, background reading "Monotheism in the Hebrew Bible" and "How Does the Hebrew Bible relate to the Ancient Near East?
    b. Student materials: "Monotheism, Henotheism, or Polytheism? worksheet; Gary Herion essay, **"How can political treaties in the ancient Near East help us understand the Israelite idea of covenant and their beliefs about god?" (below)**
    Note that some of the biblical passages may be challenging reading for your students. You may choose to work through the content as a class, checking for comprehension along the way, or ask students to work independently. You may choose to use different translations available on the Bible Odyssey website to support student comprehension — most will find the Contemporary English Version easier to understand. For even more translations, teachers might search the Bible Gateway site.

3. **Assessment: Definitions.** Students will then create clear working definitions of henotheism, monotheism and polytheism using a format of their choosing.
    a. Teacher materials: n/a
    b. Student materials: assignment instructions, optional computer access, art supplies

LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Warm-up (10 minutes) and image study (20 minutes)

Begin by prompting students to identify some things that Americans tend to worship. Students should be encouraged to interpret the word "worship" as strictly or as loosely as they like. (This is part of the exercise, since in the ancient world the idea of "worshiping a god" was not surrounded with the same aura of solemnity and theological or confessional rigor as it is today.) Students should think and write in silence for a few minutes in response to this question. Then, have students "turn and talk" with a neighbor about their ideas (this strategy helps students prepare to articulate their thoughts to the class and feel more confident about their answers). Finally, ask students to share their responses as a whole group. As you call on students to share, list student responses on the blackboard in three columns: (a) conventionally "religious" answers (God, gods); (b) typically secular/popular cultural answers (money, sports teams, fashion and appearance, self, social media); and (c) abstract ideals/values (justice, peace, law and order, tolerance). Consider using the ideas in parentheses or display some modern images (local sports logos, the American flag) to stimulate student thinking.

Ask students to review the lists. Is there a clear separation between sacred and secular answers? Some of the abstract values in list (c) may seem to be both sacred and secular. Point out to students that in the Ancient Near East, there was definitely not a clear distinction between the sacred and secular world. Ask, "How is this different than American society today?" Teachers might guide students towards three points about religion in our society that are almost the opposite of the Ancient Near Eastern world:

- In the Judeo-Christian tradition, one does not use the word "god" to apply to anything trivial! So while Americans might "worship" many things (in the loose sense of the word), for many people there is only one "god" (and that word is *not* used loosely).
- Western secularization has often led us to compartmentalize "religious things" and to restrict them to certain "holy times and holy places" (a service on a holy day at a house of worship), sharply distinguishing them from "secular" things (like what happens in the school classroom each morning during the Pledge of Allegiance, or what happens on Saturday afternoons in the fall at a college football stadium). An Ancient Near Eastern person would have a difficult time knowing why some of these would be "religious" (involving some kind of "god") while the others would not.
- Ever since the Protestant Reformation 500 years ago, many people in western civilization have insisted that religion is a *private* affair, not a *public* one. The influence of this idea is reflected in the fact that the American political system does not endorse any specific religion. In antiquity, however, a "god" — especially a chief god — could be a political symbol, and religion could often be a branch of government, helping to confirm the authority of the political state.

Explain to students that they are going to review images of gods in the Ancient Near East in order to better understand the integration between the sacred and the secular world. Divide the students into three groups and assign each group one of the sets from "Images for the Lesson: Chief Deities,

Goddesses, or Power and Politics." Have students work together to answer the questions in each packet. After 10 minutes, have students share the generalizations they developed with the rest of the class. Some key points to observe might be:

- There are a variety of gods presented. Ancient Near East cultures organized the gods into pantheons. The term *pantheon* is the official ranking of these gods in the eyes of the ruling elite and their chief god. The pantheons helped establish and reflect social order by letting different segments of society know where they stood (based on the relationships of gods within the pantheon).
- Kings and gods often resemble one another in appearance, pose and distinguishing features.
- There seems to be an overlap between the political (or historic) world of kings and the religious (or cosmic) world of the gods.
- Chief male deities are often depicted with upraised arms carrying weapons or thunderbolts.
- Chief female deities can sometimes be indicated by the way they stand atop animals.
- Since prehistoric times, Mother Goddesses were often associated with prosperity and economic bounty, including fertility (of women and of animals) and agricultural harvest.

Check student understanding by projecting the Teshub and Hepat PowerPoint for all students to see. Ask students to try to identify Teshub and Hepat and determine what they symbolize. Reinforce the understanding that gods and goddesses were aligned with the state (no separation of church and state like in the United States today) and that there were multiple gods that were recognized and worshipped.

2. Primary source examination (45 minutes)

Write the words monotheism and polytheism on the board, and ask students for their definitions of these terms. Correct if necessary. Explain to students that another way to think about divine beings is henotheism and that this belief characterized the Ancient Near East.

Henotheism is the belief that more than one god exists; however only one god deserves the worship and devotion of a specific group of people. This lesson notes that the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Egyptians believed in many different deities (polytheism) and included them in their respective pantheons**;** it also illustrates that while the ancient Israelites acknowledged that these other gods may exist, for the most part they choose to devote themselves only to Yahweh.

Pass out the primary source worksheet to students and have them read each biblical source carefully, answering the accompanying questions. You may want to go over one or two of these passages as a class since this will involve very close reading. See the notes above about alternative translations that may be helpful for students who are struggling to comprehend.

After students have completed their work individually, check for understanding by reviewing whether each source reflects monotheism, polytheism or henotheism using the answer key provided. Then discuss the answers to the summative questions together. You may want to project this timeline on a screen for students to view, scrolling through and pausing to note the following: When does

monotheism clearly begin to emerge as a belief? Henotheism? What does this suggest about religion in the Ancient Near East?

Close the lesson by asking students to hypothesize about why the Hebrews may have adopted a henotheistic belief system. Be careful to avoid and/or correct statements that suggest the Hebrews were more advanced or somehow "smarter" than the surrounding cultures, as it is clear that many Hebrews were also polytheistic (there is evidence in the Old Testament that supports this). As students are developing their ideas, share with them the "Where Did Israelite Henotheism Come From?" reading by scholar Gary Herion.

Ask students if they see any parallels between the political treaty alliances as described above and the henotheistic language of the biblical passages they read earlier. You may want to introduce the term **covenant**, used to describe the way many Israelites understood the nature of their relationship with their deity Yahweh. If students have not already noticed the parallels, share that scholars believe that the ancient Israelite idea of a religious covenant with their god (beginning around 1200 B.C.E.) was similar to the *political* treaty alliances that were prevalent among other ancient Near Eastern groups around 1400-1200 B.C.E.

ASSEESSMENT

Form students into groups of two or three. Assign them the following task, modified to fit your classroom resources and schedule. (You might also consider including pantheon and covenant as possible terms to use in this assessment.)

Choose one of the formats listed below as a way of illustrating the definitions of monotheism, polytheism and henotheism. Make sure that your product teaches the viewer about the definitions of these terms in a way that is informative and entertaining.

Possible formats:

- Write a skit that explains the three terms and record a video or podcast of the work. Include representatives from at least two groups in the Ancient Near East in your work.
- Create an animation using Flipbook that illustrates the definitions in a visual way and shares examples from the Ancient near East.
- Draw a set of three comics or illustrations that compare the terms and includes at least two quotes from the primary source worksheet.
- Write an acrostic poem for each of the three terms — within the set of poems, quote at least two phrases from the primary source worksheet.
- Develop an infographic using Piktochart that links each definition to an example from class.

EXTENDING THE LESSON

- How can the terms monotheism, polytheism and henotheism apply to other religions that you may have studied in class? (For example: Hinduism illustrates the complexity of religion because many Hindus believe that traditional deities are reflections (or avatars) of the one supreme god, Brahman. Discuss whether terms like those studied in this lesson apply. Consider introducing the terms monism or monolatry.
- Learn about Akhenaten and analyze the extent to which his ancient religious views were monotheistic. This reading on Bible Odyssey will be a helpful starting point. What evidence is given that he is monotheistic? How does this contrast with what else is known about ancient Egyptian religious beliefs? Using the image in the linked article, what part of the image might help symbolize his religious beliefs?
- Have students collect images of leaders in the world today. How do they represent themselves? Do they try to connect with religious figures or not? Discuss the ways in which leaders today use religious imagery in similar or different ways than the leaders of the Ancient Near East.
- Ask students to research Zoroastrianism, another monotheistic religion, using this BBC site, and determine ways it may have influenced later religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

RESOURCES

Bibliography

Debra Scoggins Ballentine, "Baal," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/baal

Kim Benzel, Sarah B. Graff, Yelena Rakic, and Edith W. Watts. Art of the Ancient Near East: A Resource for Educators (New York: Metropolitan Museum, 2017).
https://www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Art_of_the_Ancient_Near_East_A_Resource_for_Educators

British Broadcasting Corporation, "Zoroastrianism," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/zoroastrian/

Alan Lenzi, "How Does the Hebrew Bible Relate to the Ancient Near Eastern World?" *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/bible-basics/how-does-the-hebrew-bible-relate-to-the-ancient-near-eastern-world

"Life in Mesopotamia: Religion." Ancient Mesopotamia: This History, Our History (Chicago: The Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago).
http://mesopotamia.lib.uchicago.edu/mesopotamialife/article.php?theme=Religion

Nathan MacDonald, "Asherah," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/tools/video-gallery/a/asharah-macdonald.aspx

Steven L. McKenzie, "Kingship in the Ancient Near East," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/kingship-in-the-ane

Eric M. Orlin, "Polytheistic Rome," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/polytheistic-rome

Donald B. Redford, "The Monotheism of Akhenaten," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/places/related-articles/monotheism-of-akhenaten.aspx

Benjamin Sommer, "Monotheism in the Hebrew Bible," *Bible Odyssey*
http://www.bibleodyssey.org/people/related-articles/monotheism-in-the-hebrew-bible

Related Lessons

- Lesson Plan: Power in Ancient Mesopotamia (from the Metropolitan Museum)

- Art of the Ancient Near East (from Art History Teaching Resources)
- Ancient Near East (from Khan Academy)

Worksheets/Activities

- Image sets
- "Monotheism, Henotheism or Polytheism?" worksheet and answer key
- Herion essay

Multimedia

- Teshub and Hebat PowerPoint
- Mesopotamia Timeline

Set 1: Chief Deities

1. Look carefully at the images in this set. What do they have in common? Consider pose, appearance, gender and relationships among the people in each image.

2. What types of objects do you see in these images? What do you think those objects might symbolize?

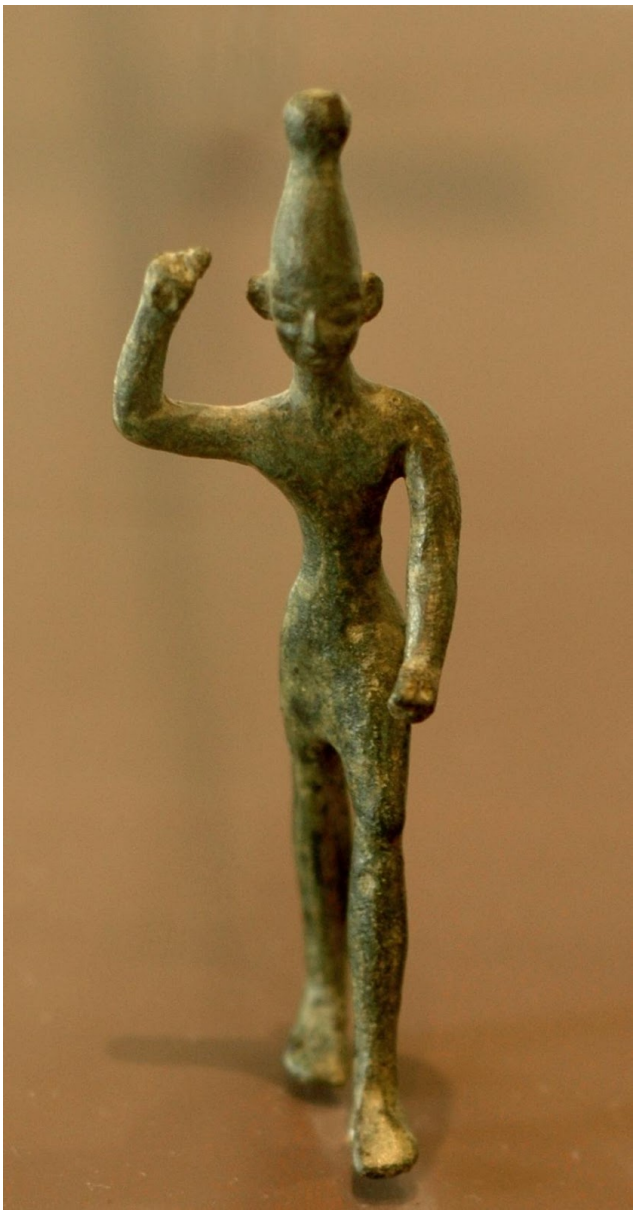
3. Looking at the images in this set as a group, develop three generalizations about how the chief gods were portrayed in the Ancient Near East. Be prepared to discuss these with your classmates.

4. What questions do you have based on these images?

Unknown Mbzt. *Baal with Thunderbolt, 1900-1750 BC, Ras Shamra*. CC BY 3.0, via Wikimedia Commons, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/e2/P1050759_Louvre_st%C3%A8le_du_Baal_au_foudre_rwk.JPG.

Rmashhadi. *Marduk*. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=14985454.

Faucher-Gudin. Hadad. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=17955031. After Austen Henry Layard, History of Egypt, Chaldea, Syria, Babylonia and Assyria, Vol. III.



Jastrow. *Ba'al*. Public Domain, 2006, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=723538.

Šarukinu. *Assur*. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7441053.

Set 2: Goddesses

1. Look carefully at the images in this set. What do they have in common? Consider pose, appearance, gender and relationships among the people in each image.

2. What types of objects do you see in these images? What do you think those objects might symbolize?

3. Looking at the images in this set as a group, develop three generalizations about how the major goddesses were portrayed in the Ancient Near East. Be prepared to discuss these with your classmates.

4. What questions do you have based on these images?

Anonymous. *Possibly Ninhursag (vegetation goddess)*. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=18804095.

Anonymous. *Innana*., Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=56431952.

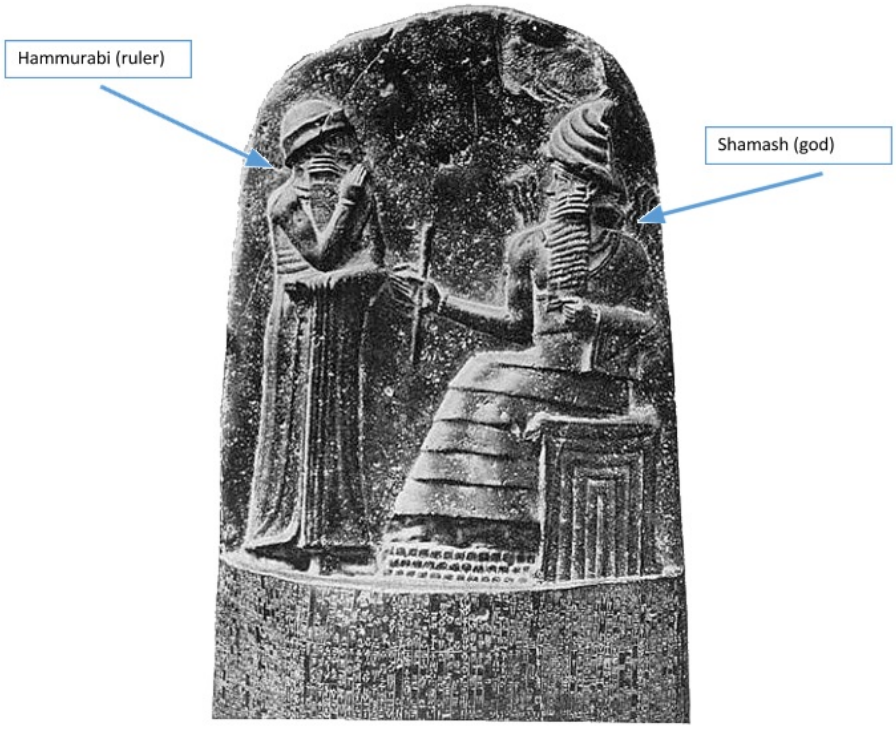
Set 3: Power and Politics

1. Look carefully at the images in this set. What do they have in common? Consider pose, appearance and relationships among the people and the gods in each image.

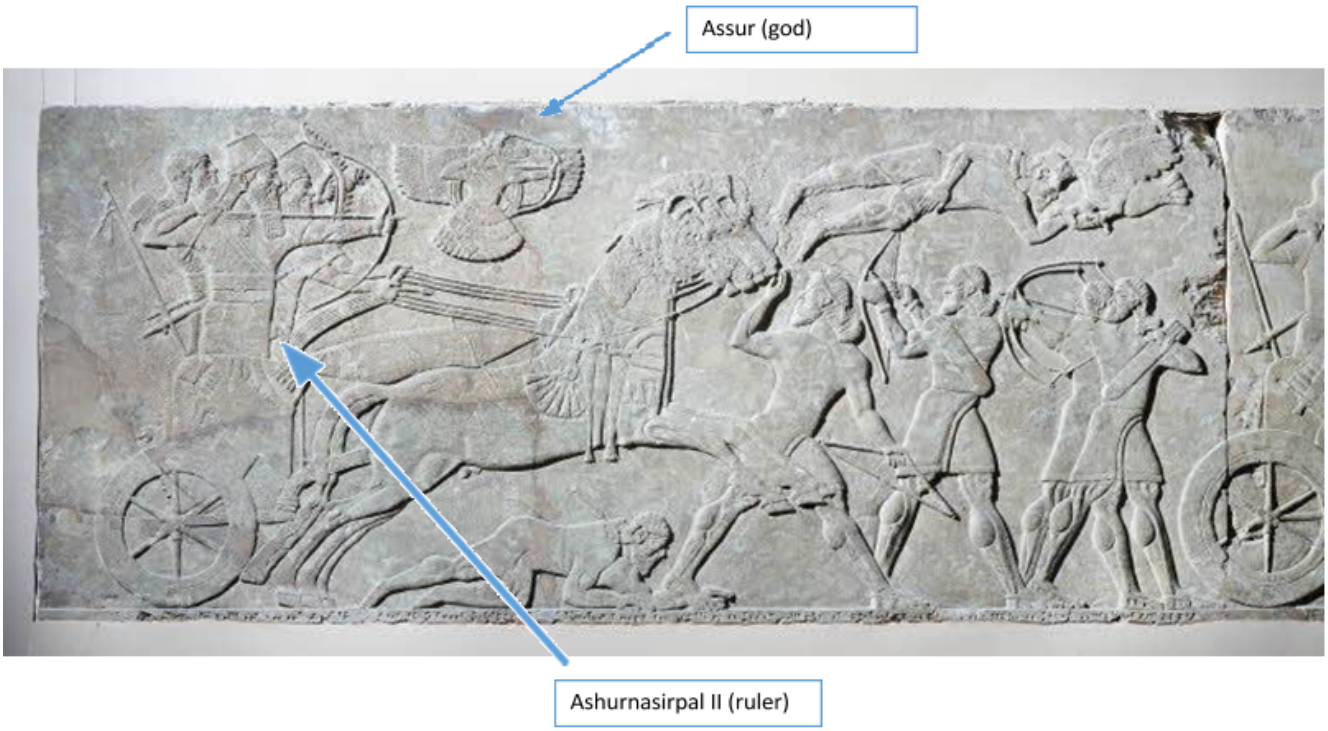
2. What types of objects do you see in these images? What do you think those objects might symbolize?

3. Looking at the images in this set as a group, develop three generalizations about the relationship between religion and the state in the Ancient Near East. Be prepared to discuss these with your classmates.

4. What questions do you have based on these images?



By Milkau_Oberer_Teil_der_Stele_mit_dem_Text_von_Hammurapis_Gesetzescode_369-2. *Shamash and Hammurabi*. Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=9812640.



Ashurnasirpal II. 865 BC-860 BC. British Museum, number 124540. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=1613002410&objectid=367036

MONOTHEISM, POLYTHEISM OR HENOTHEISM?

Examine the following passages to determine whether they express monotheistic beliefs, polytheism or henotheism. Pay careful attention to the underlined words and answer the questions paired with each reading.

Exodus 20:2-6
Approximate date written: 1200-600 B.C.E.
Text from New Revised Standard Version:
I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

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1. What would it mean to have other gods "before" this one? Does that imply that there is only one god or more than one?

2. Think about the common religious beliefs of the Ancient Near East. Why might this god be a "jealous" god?

3. Do you think the author(s) of this text were monotheistic, polytheistic or henotheistic? Support your answer with specific evidence from the passage.

Deuteronomy 32:8-9
Approximate date written: 1200-600 B.C.E.
Text from New Revised Standard Version:
When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

1. This passage seems to reflect a common belief in polytheism across the Ancient Near East. Which phrase suggests this?

2. According to this passage, do you think Jacob's people (the Israelites) were monotheistic, polytheistic or henotheistic? Support your answer with specific evidence from the passage.

Isaiah 45:5–7
Approximate date written: 538 B.C.E.
Text from New Revised Standard Version:
I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

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1. In this passage, Israel's god ("the Lord") is speaking to Cyrus, who does not believe in him (or "know him"). According to this passage, does Israel's god seem to be the only god, or are many other gods presumed to exist?

2. What kinds of powers does the god speaking in this passage seem to possess?

3. Do you think the author(s) of this text were monotheistic, polytheistic or henotheistic? Support your answer with specific evidence from the passage.

Summative Questions:

1. In the sixth century B.C.E., were the Israelites henotheistic, polytheistic or monotheistic?

2. During that same time period, in what type of religion did most of the surrounding cultures (e.g., Sumerians, Babylonians) believe?

3. Which passage most clearly suggests a shift from henotheism to monotheism? Approximately when was that written?

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1. What would it mean to have other gods "before" this one? Does that imply that there is only one god or more than one?

Some scholars have suggested that the reference to other gods is merely a reference to idols. Most, however, argue that it implies that ancient Israelites might feel tempted to follow gods other than the one ("the Lord") that is depicted as the speaker in this passage; this suggests that ancient Israelites at the time believed that more than one god existed.

2. Think about the common religious beliefs of the ancient Near East. Why might this god be a "jealous" god?

People in the Ancient Near East worshipped gods who symbolized their interests and values and, in so doing, would keep them happy. There were many gods who were associated with different things--the harvest, storms, various trades, and even the government itself. A god who insisted on your exclusive devotion might become jealous if you were sharing that devotion with other gods.

3. Do you think the author(s) of this text were monotheistic, polytheistic, or henotheistic? Support your answer with specific evidence from the passage.

If the reference to gods is a reference to idols, the passage suggests monotheistic beliefs. If it refers to deities, then the passage is henotheistic. The god speaking in it is stating that he is the most important as far as the Israelites are concerned, but implying that others exist (see the first sentence in the passage).

Deuteronomy 32:8-9
Approximate date written: 1200-600 B.C.E.
Text from New Revised Standard Version:

When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

1. This passage seems to reflect a common belief in polytheism across the Ancient Near East. Which phrase suggests this?

"The number of the gods" is one such phrase; also the Lord gets" his portion," which may imply that other gods each get their own "portions" when the human race got divided up among them.

2. According to this passage, do you think Jacob's people (the Israelites) were monotheistic, polytheistic or henotheistic? Support your answer with specific evidence from the passage.

Henotheistic. This passage suggests that many gods exists ("the number of the gods") but that "the Lord" (i.e., Yahweh) held specific importance to Jacob's people (i.e., to the Israelites).

Isaiah 45:5–7

Approximate date written: 538 B.C.E. (Although the prophet Isaiah lived in the eighth century B.C.E., many scholars believe that much of the book, including this passage, dates to a later period. If so, then prophets around the time of the Babylonian Exile attributed sayings to Isaiah as a respected prophet of old. See discussion at "Isaiah, The Book of" at *https://www.bibleodyssey.org/HarperCollinsBibleDictionary/i/isaiah*).

Text from New Revised Standard Version:

I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god. I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe; I the Lord do all these things.

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1. In this passage, Israel's god ("the Lord") is speaking to Cyrus, who does not believe in him (or "know him"). According to this passage, does Israel's god seem to be the only god, or are many other gods presumed to exist?

In the underlined portion "the Lord" states there are no other gods.

2. What kinds of powers does the god speaking in this passage seem to possess?

He seems to be very powerful, the creator of the world who can even use people who do not believe in him, which implies a kind of *universalism*. He is not just the particular god of a particular people (Israel) but also the supreme god over *everyone*.

3. Do you think the author(s) of this text were monotheistic, polytheistic or henotheistic? Support your answer with specific evidence from the passage.

Monotheistic. The authors are very firm on the point that there is no other god, even though Cyrus presumably doesn't seem to recognize that fact.

Summative Questions:

1. Prior to the sixth century B.C.E., were the Israelites henotheistic, polytheistic or monotheistic?

Revised: On the basis of these passages, were the ancient Israelites henotheistic, polytheistic or monotheistic?

2. During that same time period, in what type of religion did most of the surrounding cultures (e.g., Sumerians, Babylonians) believe?

Polytheistic religion, where the many different gods were each tied to the many different interests and values of particular groups of people, and where the chief god was closely associated with the ruler of the state.

3. Which passage is most clearly monotheistic?

Isaiah 45:5-7. Most scholars argue that Israelite monotheism developed over time. There is evidence in passages 1, 2, and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible that especially in earlier periods, Israelites acknowledged that other gods exist and that other people might follow them. The Israelites whose traditions are included in the Hebrew Bible decided, however, that they must follow "the Lord" alone. Eventually, this henotheistic approach evolved into monotheism, as illustrated by the Isaiah passage. This shift becomes more noticeable to scholars in materials from the sixth century B.C.E. and later.

How can political treaties in the ancient Near East help us understand the Israelite idea of covenant and their beliefs about god?

By Gary Herion

Many scholars believe that Israelite worship of one god was a logical outgrowth of their views about **covenant**, i.e., their relationship with the deity Yahweh. (Note that many religiously traditional Jews consider the pronunciation of this name to be sacrilegious. Many Bible translations render "Yahweh" as "the Lord," the title used by many Jews and Christians). Evidence suggests that the Israelites (beginning around 1200 B.C.E.) modeled their notion of a *religious* covenant with Yahweh on the analogy of ANE *political* treaty alliances (or "covenants") that were prevalent around 1400-1200 B.C.E. Those treaties were key instruments of international diplomacy, and they were well known throughout the Ancient Near Eastern world at the time of Moses. They helped cement alliances between powerful emperors and less-powerful princes and local governors.

Politics in the Ancient Near East was governed by a number of political alliance treaties. In all these treaties the powerful emperor (or suzerain) addresses an inferior prince or governor (his vassal) reminding him of their special political bond. This was done in two steps. First, in the Prologue to these treaties the suzerain reminded the vassal of past favors that the suzerain had granted the vassal. Usually, this described the positive aspects of their past history together. In one treaty, for example, the suzerain says to the vassal: "Even though you were weak and enfeebled, I placed you on your father's throne." Second, in the Stipulations to these treaties the emperor begins to itemize the vassal's obligations that, in gratitude for past favors, the vassal willingly agrees to abide by. Often one of the initial stipulations showcases their special bond as an exclusive bond. For example, in some treaties the first stipulation says: "You will turn your head to no other lord." In others it may say something like: "You will recognize no other lord but me." Of course, in the Ancient Near Eastern

world there were, in fact, many other lords and emperors, all competing to expand their domains at the expense of the others. The first stipulation of these treaties is, in effect, saying: "There may indeed be other emperors and overlords out there, but as far as you are concerned I am the only one for you."

Many scholars believe that under the inspiration of Moses (ca. 1200 B.C.E.), the Israelites took the old and familiar notion of *political* loyalty as expressed in those treaties and transferred it to the realm of *religious* loyalty as expressed in their sense of their covenant with their god, Yahweh. Notice that the opening verse of the religious covenant in Exodus 20:2-3 contains both a Prologue and the first of the Stipulations, just like suzerainty treaties. Though the traditional understanding of Moses is as a monotheist, some scholars argue that this development actually reflected henotheism: "There may indeed be other gods, but Yahweh (i.e., the Lord) is the only one *for us*." This was the first command of that covenant: "You shall have no other gods *before me*." The practical concern of Israel worshiping the right god apparently outweighed philosophical speculation about the existence of other gods. What do you think — is there a connection between the political world and religious beliefs of the ancient Israelites?